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NATURAL DISASTER REDUCTION: INTERRELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN TECHNOLOGICAL AND NATURAL HAZARDS

Technical session

Problems facing a rapidly industrializing country in planning and response for disasters

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1. During the past 20 years, the place of development, industrialization and urbanization in Thailand has been dramatic. There are now major industrial development projects in almost every province. Bangkok is an incipient mega-city. Unfortunately, the price paid in this rush for growth has been that profit has sometimes been put before safety of the environment. The effects are to be seen in increased air and water pollution, deforestation, soil erosion, illegal issuance of land titles, illegal and legal factories that violate environmental protection laws, environmental problems relating to mining, and weather and climatic changes due to deforestation and destruction of watersheds. There has also been a marked change in the pattern of disasters, from the occasional cyclone or drought or floods of manageable proportions to serious droughts and floods with associated landslides, and more recently a disturbing number of technological disasters, structural failures and transportation accidents. Vulnerabilities have increased and, as always, it is the underprivileged who are suffering the most.

2. The problems which now confront the country can be attributed to several causes: outdated legislation and codes; a national organizational structure for disaster management which is still relief oriented; poor inter-departmental liaison; jealously guarded interests and power; overlap of

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responsibilities; insufficient and poorly trained staff; less than optimal utilization of resources; and a widespread lack of understanding of the causes and effects of disasters. Enforcement of regulations is usually reactive.

3. Looking ahead, if improvements are to succeed in Thailand they must be appropriate to the culture. Thailand is not a society of law but of relationships and patronage. We need therefore to develop a culture of greater social responsibility and self-regulation. Social sanctions must be developed and incentives devised. A culture of compliance will be more successful than enforcement dependent upon inadequate resources. Investors must be persuaded to include disaster mitigation measures in investment costs. In this process, the responsible private sector is helping to set an example. Thailand needs a more integrated, multi-sectoral, approach to disaster management, set in a developmental context. Revisions to laws and organizational structures are necessary. A model disaster action plan has been developed for Thailand's biggest industrial estate at Rayong, and the National Economic and Social Development Board will soon publish a journal on the theme "Disaster and National Development" as an awareness-raising exercise at the highest levels.

4. In a rapidly industrializing country such as Thailand, it is impractical to consider "natural" and "technological" disasters as entirely separate issues.